Grand Isle facility expected to double seed oyster production

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Baby oyster production is expected to double and help seed public oyster grounds across coastal Louisiana now that a state-of-the-art oyster hatchery has opened in Grand Isle.

The hatchery is a far cry from the old boat shed with a rotten roof LSU professor John Supan worked out of for years. On Wednesday, he was like the proud father showing off the technology at the new facility to state officials and welcoming them into the new era of oyster production.

"Every citizen in Louisiana will benefit from the research that is done here," said F. King Alexander, LSU president.

Owned by the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the hatchery is run by Supan, who also works with Louisiana Sea Grant. The hatchery, named for longtime oysterman and advocate Mike Voisin, who died in 2013, is expected to produce 1 billion oyster larvae a year as well as other seed oysters. That 1 billion is about twice as much as the oyster hatchery was able to produce last year.

Randy Pausina, state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries assistant
The state is building another facility in Buras that will take the baby oysters from the hatchery in Grand Isle and place them in large tanks with shells, where they will be grown for a short time before they can be released to oyster grounds, Pausina said.

"The southeast of the state is where the majority of our oyster lands are," he said.

The 1 billion baby oysters a year production at the hatchery won't be enough to reseed the entire coast following a disaster. But it will help jump-start an area that is having trouble, said Patrick Banks, Department of Wildlife and Fisheries oyster program manager.

Oyster hatchery operations began in 1990 during a time when natural oyster reseeding had slowed because of drought, according to Louisiana Sea Grant. In 1993, Supan took over the operations in a facility near the bridge to Grand Isle. Supan has directed research on hatchery production and specifically the development of an oyster with three, instead of the normal two, chromosomes.

The importance of this “triploid” oyster is that it’s sterile, which means it doesn’t expend energy during the summer months by spawning. The result for oyster growers is that this oyster grows faster and remains fat throughout the summer months when natural oysters are thin and watery.

The hatchery also will continue to produce triploid seed oysters that growers purchase through the Louisiana Oyster Dealers and Growers Association. The hope is other businesses will take over the seeding production task.

“We don’t want to be in the seed business. We want to foster new seed businesses,” Pausina said.